New Bill Can Save Mineral King

Using the Forest Service's own statistics, the Sierra Club believes there is a strong argument for retaining Mineral King as an area catering to outdoor recreation that does not require extensive development. For example: the final environmental impact statement declares that from 1970 to 1990 the demand for camping in Forest Service areas will increase 43 percent, while skiing will increase 37 percent. Statewide, the demand for camping will increase 76 percent by 1985. Properly managed, a proportional share of the increased demand for camping can be met at Mineral King.

According to statistics produced by the Bureau of Outdoor Recreation in 1973, 11 percent of the nation's outdoor recreationists participated in camping in developed campgrounds. Five percent hiked with a pack and did rock and mountain climbing, and five percent camped in remote or wilderness areas. According to the Forest Service, only three percent participated in skiing. Using these statistics, the Forest Service should place greater emphasis upon providing more campgrounds and hiking areas than providing more ski areas. The emphasis the Forest Service places upon developed facilities vs. camping is revealed by the fact that over one million visitor days are expected for use of overnight accommodations, while only 60,000 visitor days of use will be permitted for camping.

There are alternative sites for ski development in the southern Sierra. None of these by themselves would provide the capacity for Mineral King at full development, but if they were all developed they could satisfy a large part of the projected demand. Peppermint and Jordan east of Porterville and Sherman Pass on the Kern Plateau have been identified as potential areas for ski development. The Sierra Club has made a preliminary investigation of these areas and has found no major objections to their development. If serious proposals are made to develop these areas, the Sierra Club advocates thorough environmental studies and an investigation of their economic feasibility. Such studies may show these areas are a viable alternative to development of Mineral King.

The estimated costs for using the proposed facilities at Mineral King would be prohibitive to the average family. The expenditure for one overnight visitor would range from $64 to $91 in the winter and from $38 to $65 in the summer. For a family of three or four, the cost of a weekend at Mineral King could amount to a few hundred dollars, far beyond the financial capability of the average family. If Mineral King were retained in a natural condition, the major cost to a visitor would be the transportation to get there. There would be no discrimination on the basis of ability to pay. The proposed project must attract a considerable number of affluent visitors if there is to be a return on the $60 million private investment required for the development.

It should be pointed out that there is no firm proposal for a means to finance the access road into Mineral King. The 24-mile road would cost 18-21 million dollars in 1975 dollars, nearly a million dollars per mile. No matter which method might be selected of the several proposed, the taxpayer would end up paying the bill. The only alternative would be a toll road which would greatly increase the cost to a visitor and probably make the project uneconomic from the standpoint of the developer. Construction of the road could not begin for at least a few years and by then the costs would be considerably greater due to inflation.

If Mineral King were developed, an increase in the use of energy would result. Additional fuel would be consumed by large numbers of vehicles traveling to Mineral King, and additional electrical consumption would be required by the facilities themselves. The project would have a peak capacity of 5,000 Kw—enough for a city of 5,000 people. The Sierra Club believes this energy should be used for the necessities of the average citizen rather than for the entertainment of the affluent. If Mineral King were kept in a natural condition and used for the enjoyment of its outstanding natural beauty on its own terms, there would be no need to run power lines across Sequoia National Park and stimulate additional use of electricity.

The Sierra Club is pleased that Congressman John Krebs will soon introduce a bill to add Mineral King to Sequoia National Park. We have not seen the bill, so we do not know its details. But we anticipate it will receive our support and expect there will be hearings held on it in the House in the near future. By adding Mineral King to Sequoia National Park, we can correct the mistake made years ago in leaving it out under the erroneous assumption that the area contained valuable mineral deposits.

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